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# Sabah and Sarawak in the 14th General Election 2018 (GE14): Local Factors and State Nationalism

James Chin

**Abstract:** Many would argue that the main factors in Pakatan Harapan's victory were the 1MDB scandal, anti-Najib and anti-UMNO sentiments, and Mahathir's ability to penetrate the rural Malay constituencies so as to split the UMNO/PAS vote. In the East Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak, however, it was local factors and state nationalism that largely decided the outcome of GE14. In this article, I will argue that the rise of state nationalism means that the most potent political issue in contemporary East Malaysia is MA63 – or the 1963 Malaysia Agreement. MA63 gives Sabah and Sarawak autonomy in a wide range of areas. For the past half-century, the East Malaysia polity has felt that it has lost its autonomy in many areas stipulated in the MA63 agreement, due to the centralisation of bureaucratic powers by the federal government. This has created a strong sense of historical grievance among Sabahans and Sarawakians, especially the non-Muslim native communities. The MA63 issue combined with local factors such as the selection of candidates and internal party disputes as well as sabotage together better reflect the on-the-ground experience of GE14 in Sabah and Sarawak.

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**Keywords:** Malaysia, GE14, Sabah, Sarawak, Malaysia Agreement 1963

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## Introduction

In this article I will explain the reasons why GE14's results in Sabah and Sarawak were largely decided by local factors, not national ones. Although the general mood was against Barisan Nasional (BN), and Najib Razak in particular, it was local factors that decided most of the seats in the Borneo states. The unhappiness over the 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63) and the calls for state nationalism were the key features of the prevailing political mood in both states. While Sabah held both parliamentary and state elections, in Sarawak only parliamentary ones were held. Sarawak holds separate state elections, the most recent ones in 2016.

The end result of this discontent was that, for the first time in living memory, both the Borneo states would be ruled by a different party from the one that controls the federal government, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) alliance. Sarawak is now under the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), while Sabah is governed by a Parti Warisan Sabah–Pakatan Harapan (PWS–PH) alliance government.

## The 1963 Malaysia Agreement Controversy

The starting point for understanding contemporary politics in the Borneo states is MA63, the agreement that created the Federation of Malaysia. It was signed by the United Kingdom, Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, and Sarawak. There is no space here to discuss MA63 in detail, other than to appreciate that it grants the states of North Borneo (as Sabah was then called) and Sarawak a high degree of autonomy within the proposed federation. The origins of this autonomy lie in what is called the “Twenty Points” – a set of 20 demands made by the political leaders of North Borneo and Sarawak in return for agreeing to form the Malaysian federation (*Cobbold Report*, see Great Britain 1962). These were essentially political guarantees for a very high degree of autonomy within a federal system.

Sabah and Sarawak leaders felt, both then and now, that they would be “taken over” by those in the peninsula if they did not retain a high degree of autonomy. So they asked for autonomy in areas like language (English would remain the official language), religion (Islam was not to be the official religion), immigration (they could deny entry to Malaysians coming from outside the state), “Borneonisation” (only locals to fill senior civil service posts), tariffs and finance, education, as well as regarding control of their natural resources (Chin 2014, 2015; Puyok 2016).

Save for its powers over immigration, all these supposedly autonomous matters were effectively taken over by the federal government via

bureaucratic regulations over the years that followed – that with minimal consultation with Kuching and Kota Kinabalu. I argue that this marginalisation has resulted in the underdevelopment of Sabah and Sarawak compared to those states in the peninsula. State nationalists like to point out that many parts of the interior in Sabah and Sarawak do not even have access to electricity or running water.

The political ideologies of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and *ketuanan* Islam (Islamic supremacy), both strongly maintained by the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party, are controversial in Sabah and Sarawak (Chin 2015a). The main indigenous peoples in Sabah – the Kadazandusun Murut (KDM) – and in Sarawak – the Dayaks – are largely non-Muslim. More importantly, the ethnic Malays in both states do not see the Malayan ethnic Malays as their brethren – while the version of Islam practiced in both states is far more tolerant. This is largely due to the population structure. Both states are very pluralistic, with no single ethnic group making up more than 40 per cent of the state population – unlike Malaya, where the Malays/Muslims constitute more than half of the people living there. In Sarawak, 40 per cent of the population is Christian while Islam is not recognised as the official religion in the state. Hence, the standard joke among the KDM and Dayak is that they are “second class *bumiputera*” when compared to the ethnic Malays. They claimed also they did not really benefit from the extensive affirmative action policies of the New Economic Policy (NEP) adopted first from 1971 (Chin 2017).

## Sabah

In the decade preceding GE14, politics in Sabah was dominated by Musa Aman, Sabah UMNO’s powerful chief minister. Musa comes from one of Sabah’s most prominent political families while his brother, Anifah Aman, was Malaysia’s foreign minister. Through a combination of wealth and ruthless political manoeuvres, he cemented Sabah UMNO’s position by increasing the number of seats held by Sabah UMNO and the Muslim community – ensuring that Muslim-majority constituencies formed about half of all those in the state. UMNO was not only seen as a power unto itself but Musa Aman was himself very much seen as Sabah UMNO’s strongman (Chin and Puyok 2010).

The watershed moment came in 2016, when Shafie Apdal – UMNO’s vice president and Musa’s rival – was sacked from the federal cabinet when he questioned Prime Minister Najib Razak over the 1MDB scandal. Najib, who was directly implicated in this scandal, took it as a direct challenge and so removed Shafie (along with several other key ministers, including

the deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin). The sacking caused a commotion inside Sabah UMNO, as Shafie was the most senior Sabahan within the UMNO hierarchy. At this point, Shafie only really had two options: he could, first, either join one of the Sabah PH parties or enrol in one of the other existing Sabah-based opposition ones; in fact, Shafie was approached by the People's Justice Party (PKR) to join them. The second option was to form a new political party.<sup>1</sup>

Shafie did not want to join PKR or any of the other PH parties, because he wished to stand on a Sabah nationalism platform and to be a Sabah nationalist; joining PH would simply mean that he would subsequently be accused of supporting Malaysians. Nor did he want to join any of the existing Sabah-based opposition parties either, as none of them could show that they had state-wide support. In fact, many of these parties were dominated by a single personality and their support bases were very narrowly defined. What Shafie wanted was to create a political party that would gain support from all the three major political groups in Sabah: namely, the Muslims, the non-Muslim *bumiputeras* (NMB), and the Chinese. Prior to his sacking, Shafie had held discussions with Darrel Leiking, the PKR member of parliament from Penampang. Leiking, who comes from a political family, was widely seen as representing a new generation of KDM leader, one who could acquire the support of the younger NMB community – who were disillusioned by Sabah UMNO's total dominance. In addition, Leiking was popular with the youth of the Chinese community too.

The strategy was remarkably simple. Shafie was to attract the Muslim vote – primarily from Sabah's east coast – while Leiking was to capture the NMB vote – primarily from the KDM. Both men did not really worry about the Chinese vote, as they knew that the sentiment among the urban Chinese was unanimously anti-BN. They also managed to convince a young Democratic Action Party (DAP) state assemblyman, Junz Wong, to join them. Wong was supposed to reach out to the Chinese community.

In early 2016, Shafie began secret negotiations to take over Parti Pembangunan Warisan Sabah, a dormant political party, and by September he was the party leader. The rationale was simple. The registrar of societies (RoS), controlled by UMNO, was likely to reject his bid to form a new political party – or, at the very least, delay the approval thereof. There were many cases of RoS delaying the registration of new parties if they were seen to be seriously challenging the BN's political base. In October 2016,

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1 The following section on the formation of PWS is largely based on interviews with senior leaders of that party.

RoS approved a name change to Parti Warisan Sabah (PWS). Leiking became the deputy president. The vice presidents were Jaujan Sambakong (Sabah UMNO, Sulabayan assemblyman), Junz Wong (DAP, Likas assemblyman), and Organisation of KDM Malaysia president, Peter Anthony. Thus, from the moment of its founding, PWS had all the major ethnic groups (KDM, Muslims, Chinese) represented at the leadership level.

Many Sabahans saw PWS as the agent of change, similar to the way they had seen Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) back in 1985. The similarities are striking, indeed. PBS was established by Joseph Pairin Kitingan after he was sacked as a minister in the Berjaya state government. Like Apdal later, Pairin was sacked because he challenged the authority of the then chief minister, Harris Salleh. In the 1985 and 1986 state elections, Sabahans backed PBS and removed Berjaya from government (Kahin 1992; Puthucherry 1985).

## The Campaign

Even prior to the formal campaign period, PWS had the political momentum – with many of its rallies attracting thousands of people (*Daily Express* 2016). It was obvious that PWS's Sabah platform was well received by the population, especially the Chinese and NMB. PWS's strategy was simple. Shafie's support was strong on the east coast, especially among the Suluk and Bajaus, while Leiking's powerbase was among the KDM and Chinese on the west coast. The calculation was that if they could attain about half the possible support from KDM and Muslims, then they would be able to win. The Chinese vote was not a problem; it was understood that it was always going to solidly be for the opposition. The underlying message was Sabah nationalism, as in getting rid of Sabah UMNO – a symbol of the federal government.<sup>2</sup>

Initially PWS wanted all the opposition parties to come together under a loose alliance so as to coherently challenge Sabah BN. This was not possible due primarily to personality conflicts. In the end, PWS decided that the best option was an alliance with only PH Sabah. Joining PH was seen as a political liability, since PWS was claiming to be fighting for MA63 and one of its key demands was a return of 40 per cent of all Sabah taxes collected by the federal government. Under MA63, indeed, Sabah was supposed to be given this percentage.

The smaller opposition parties came together in Gabungan Sabah (United Sabah Alliance), essentially a coalition of parties that stood solely

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2 Interview with a senior PWS leader in July 2018.

on the platform of Sabah nationalism. Their manifesto had the strongest backing on Sabah's rights under MA63. Essentially they were arguing that Sabah should quit the federation until such time the federal government gave Sabah complete autonomy within the Malaysian state, as originally promised under the terms of MA63.

Many Sabah nationalists were torn between the PWS–Sabah PH and the GPS; in the end, however, they decided to back the PWS–Sabah PH alliance as it was seen as having a real chance to dislodge Sabah UMNO from power. The momentum to this end was especially strong in the Chinese and NMB areas. Defectors from Sabah BN were particularly effective in turning the electorate against Sabah BN, as they had credibility when they campaigned against their former parties. These defectors were able to give precise examples of how Sabah UMNO was involved in corrupt practices and how Sabah BN had marginalised the non-Muslim community and sold out Sabah's best interests to UMNO.<sup>3</sup>

PBS, the key NMB party within the Sabah BN, suffered from leadership fatigue. Many younger KDM voters were unhappy that Sabah UMNO was marginalising the KDM community and blamed KDM leaders such as Pairin for not standing up to that party. The bulk of KDM voters were Christians, and they were increasingly uncomfortable with the Islamisation programme pushed by the federal UMNO. They felt that the KDM BN parties did not sufficiently push back against the Islamisation programme in Sabah. They were most disappointed that PBS had been led by the same personalities since its inception in 1985. Prior to GE14, Pairin Kitingan had promised to step down and hand power over to a new generation of leaders. But this did not happen, and when it was announced that he would stand again for both parliamentary and state seats this sent a strong, negative signal to KDM voters. In addition, Dr. Maximus Ongkili – the man Pairin had identified as his successor – did not signify a genuine political change since he was from Pairin's own generation. Ongkili was one of PBS's pioneer members. Younger KDM voters wanted a much younger person to take over as PBS leader, and thus grew increasingly frustrated with the old guard.

The problem of leadership renewal was also present in the other two BN KDM parties, United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs). Both these parties started off as splinter ones from PBS in 1994, thus they faced the same problem as it had done – being seen by the younger KDM voters as “old and tired,” as well as too subservient to Sabah UMNO and Musa Aman,

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3 Interviews with several PH campaigners in July 2018.



the rich and powerful Sabah UMNO leader who, as noted, was also the chief minister. PBRS was especially seen as old and tired when its leader, Joseph Kurup, eventually handed over his seat to his son, Arthur Kurup.

In general, many KDM voters had negative views of their parties within the Sabah BN. They were also angry that the illegals issue was still not resolved despite a RCI report,<sup>4</sup> and saw Sabah UMNO as being too close to the national branch thereof – and therefore as neglecting Sabah’s rights under MA63. Actually the PWS–PH alliance benefited from the Gabugan Sabah’s nationalistic “Sabah Rights” campaign. Many Sabahans, especially those in urban areas who believed in Sabah nationalism, voted for the PWS–PH alliance because they knew only it had a realistic chance to replace the Sabah BN government.

Musa and Sabah UMNO were also suffering from hubris and over-confidence.<sup>5</sup> Sabah UMNO thought that vote-buying – used successfully in previous elections – would work equally well this time around too. What they did not realise was that the voters were becoming weary of Musa Aman and Sabah UMNO. As mentioned earlier, Sabah UMNO members who defected to the opposition were very effective in recounting to voters the high level of corruption within Sabah UMNO – in particular, among the close associates of Musa Aman. Musa himself was implicated by pay-offs related to the timber industry.<sup>6</sup> Musa did not help himself when he nominated five members of his family to be candidates, including his brother and son.<sup>7</sup>

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4 More than one-third of Sabah’s population are illegal migrants, mostly Muslims from the southern Philippines and Indonesia. They were given Malaysian citizenship during “Project M” (M for Mahathir), in order to ensure Muslim dominance in elections and politics. A 2014 Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) found evidence that the federal UMNO was involved. Many NMB and KDM voters blamed the KDM parties in Sabah BN for not doing anything about these illegals. For a summary of the RCI findings, see Frank (2006).

5 In an interview with a Sabah UMNO minister prior to the election, he was very confident that the Muslim seats would be retained.

6 The corruption allegations against Musa Aman were first published on the whistleblowing website Sarawak Report. It was alleged that he had received millions of dollars into an overseas account in return for granting timber concessions. The allegations turned out to have some merit to them, when in November 2018 he was formally charged with corruption. See *The Star* (2018a). The original allegations, published in 2012, can be found online at: <[www.sarawakreport.org/2012/04/hold-on-trust-for-aman-more-devastating-evidence-from-the-icac-in-vestigation/](http://www.sarawakreport.org/2012/04/hold-on-trust-for-aman-more-devastating-evidence-from-the-icac-in-vestigation/)> (29 November 2018).

7 Both went on to win their respective seats. While it is not uncommon in Sabah for political families such as the Amans to have more than one candidate, having five is nonetheless unusually high.

## Results

Prior to the election, it was expected that the contest would be a close one – and that the deciding votes would be from the Muslim constituencies. The KDM and Chinese were widely expected to vote for the PWS–PH alliance. The only question mark was over the Muslim constituencies, as previously they had been susceptible to vote-buying.<sup>8</sup> In the end, almost all the young people from the KDM, Muslim, and Chinese communities backed the PWS–PH alliance. Their message of change, the corruption allegations against leaders such as Najib and Musa, and pent-up frustrations over MA63 and illegals – harboured against Sabah BN and Sabah UMNO in particular – all combined to create a tidal wave of opposition. Sabahans wanted “independence” from UMNO, the symbol of federal political oppression. As mentioned earlier, unlike in other Malaysian federal states, change of government in Sabah is not a new thing – and the voters simply reverted back to the old pattern.

At the parliamentary level, PWS–PH managed to win 14 of the 25 available seats – while Sabah BN only won 10. The last seat went to the Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah (STAR–GS), part of Gabungan Sabah (GS), the party with the strongest MA63 message. At the state level, results were deadlocked. Both PWS–PH and Sabah BN won 29 seats each, with the final two going to STAR–GS.

The strongest anti-BN vote came from the Chinese community. These individuals essentially voted as a single bloc against Sabah BN, causing the collapse of all the key Chinese-based Sabah BN parties, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). The only minor party that did well was STAR–GS, the champions of MA63. Part of the reason why STAR was able to win was due to the personality of its leader, Jeffrey Gapani Kitingan. Jeffrey is probably the most well-known state nationalist and MA63 champion in Sabah, having drawn on this issue for almost the entirety of his political career. He is also the younger brother of Joseph Pairin Kitingan, president of BN–PBS. They have a political feud going back decades, with Jeffrey regularly challenging – and losing to – his brother in previous elections. In the 2018 election, however, Jeffrey managed to defeat Pairin for the Tambunan state seat. This is highly significant given that Pairin is *Huguan Sion*, or paramount leader of the KDM community. Prior to his defeat, Pairin had represented the Tambunan constituency for some 42 years. This defeat clearly symbolised that the younger voters rejected old KDM leaders such as Pairin who,

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8 For examples, see the following pre-GE14 analysis: Promchertchoo (2018); Welsh (2018); Chin (2018b).

as mentioned previously, was seen as too subservient to Sabah UMNO, old and tired, and not really fighting for Sabah's interests – as well as too comfortable, as a result of being part of the ruling elite.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1. Results of Sabah Parliamentary Election 2018**

| <b>Government</b>                          | <b>Won</b>      | <b>Total</b> |
|--|-----------------|--------------|
| Sabah UMNO                                 | 7               |              |
| PBS  | 1               |              |
| UPKO                                       | 1               |              |
| PBRs                                       | 1               |              |
|  | Sabah BN Total  | 10           |
| Opposition                                 |                 |              |
| Parti Warisan Sabah                        | 8               |              |
| PH–DAP                                     | 3               |              |
| PH–PKR                                     | 3               |              |
|  | PWS–PH alliance | 14           |
| Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah (STAR) | 1               |              |
|  | Gabungan Sabah  | 1            |
|  | Total           | 25           |

Source: Malaysian Election Commission website (n.d.).

**Table 2. Results of the Sabah State Election 2018**

| <b>Govt- Sabah BN</b>                      | <b>Won</b>      | <b>Total</b> |
|--|-----------------|--------------|
| Sabah UMNO                                 | 17              |              |
| PBS  | 6               |              |
| UPKO                                       | 5               |              |
| PBRs                                       | 1               |              |
|  | Sabah BN Total  | 29           |
| Opposition                                 |                 |              |
| Parti Warisan Sabah                        | 21              |              |
| PH–DAP                                     | 6               |              |
| PH–PKR                                     | 2               |              |
|  | PWS–PH alliance | 29           |
| Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah (STAR) | 2               |              |
|  | Gabungan Sabah  | 2            |
|  | Total           | 60           |

Source: Malaysian Election Commission website (n.d.).

9 *Malaysiakini* (2018a). In my many interviews with younger members of the PBS, they openly criticise their leader Pairin – many expressing the sentiment that he should have retired years ago and given way to a younger generation of leaders. They also felt that the old leaders were hanging on to their positions, thus denying the next generation the chance to move up.

## Sarawak

Prior to the election, the general consensus was that only the urban Chinese seats were competitive while the Muslim and Dayak ones were secure. The three most important political events prior to the election were: Taib Mahmud's elevation to state governor; the short tenure of Adenan Satem; and, the 2016 state elections. All three are related.

Taib Mahmud is Sarawak's longest-serving chief minister. He ruled from 1981 until 2014, when he stepped up to the post of Governor – supposedly only a non-political, ceremonial one. His 33-year rule was marked by strong allegations of corruption that made his family one of the wealthiest in the region, siphoning off a minimum of USD 15 billion from corrupt deals in Sarawak (Straumann 2014). During the latter part of his rule, he was the number one issue in Sarawak elections – with widespread calls for the federal government to investigate the corruption allegations against him. He was such a strongman that he was not only able to engineer his own nomination as state governor, but also to handpick Adenan Satem – his ex-brother-in-law – as his successor as chief minister (Chin 2015b).

Adenan started off with a lot of goodwill, as all strata of Sarawak society were tired of Taib Mahmud and weary of the corruption allegations. In order to obtain a personal mandate, Adenan called for a state election on 7 May 2016. Adenan cleverly deflected the corruption issue surrounding Taib Mahmud by concentrating instead on Sarawak nationalism, claiming that under his administration getting back the “rights” stipulated under MA63 was the number one priority (Mohamed and Rashaad 2017; Hah 2018). This was hugely popular among the population, including sections of the normally anti-establishment Chinese voting bloc. Under Adenan, Sarawak BN won an unprecedented 72 out of the 82 possible seats in the State Assembly, a success rate of 87 per cent. He won all the Muslim-majority constituencies and more than 90 per cent of the Dayak seats. The only community he was not able to dominate was the Chinese one, which split its vote between the Sarawak DAP and the SUPP – the local-based Chinese party. Unfortunately for Sarawak BN, Adenan died of heart failure in January 2017, after serving as chief minister for less than three years – and less than 12 months after the May 2016 state polls. Abang Johari Tun Openg, hailing from a prominent Malay family, took over as chief minister.

## The Campaign

When the 2018 general election date was announced, Sarawak BN was confident that – based on the 2016 results – only the Chinese-majority seats were at risk. The Muslim-majority and Dayak-majority seats were considered safe. After all, it was a parliamentary election, and the assumption was that voters would not take it as seriously as a state one. The Sarawak BN used essentially the same message for the 2018 election: state nationalism. Sarawak could only be ruled by Sarawak-based parties, and local voters should be suspicious of “Malayan parties” such as PH – as they would not be MA63 or state champions. This simple message had worked incredibly well in the 2016 state election, and there was no indication that it would no work in the 2018 parliamentary one too. Moreover, like in Sabah, extensive vote-buying by the ruling BN has always been a key feature of all previous Sarawak elections – a practice that Sarawak BN was notorious for indulging in over many decades (Chin 1997a; Aeria 2005).

Sarawak BN became even more confident when reports emerged that there were differences between Sarawak DAP and PKR over seat allocation. It was well known that Sarawak DAP saw all Chinese-majority constituencies as its “rice bowl.” In the 2013 general election, due to internal squabbling, DAP was forced to give up Miri constituency to PKR. Dr. Michael Teo, a PKR Chinese candidate, won the seat – but he was known to be uninterested in being an MP and did not attend parliament regularly. Dr. Teo was instead trying to put forward his own candidate, Bill Kayong, to replace him for the 2018 pools. Before any announcement could be made, Kayong was assassinated in a case related to native titles (*The Straits Times* 2016). Without a clear candidate to replace Dr. Teo, there were widespread rumours that DAP would swap the Miri seat with PKR. This plan, however, was never implemented when federal PH leaders decided that all the PH component parties would contest seats in the same constituencies as they had done in the 2013 general election. Fresh on their mind was the bickering between DAP and PKR in the 2016 state elections, which probably caused DAP to lose at least one or more seat.<sup>10</sup> With Dr. Teo eventually renominated for the Miri seat, SUPP was confident that it had a chance to win.

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10 Interviews with DAP and PKR leaders.

## Results

The results came as a massive shock to Sarawak BN. The opposition won 12 out of 31 seats. While losing all the Chinese-majority constituencies had always been a possibility, they never thought that they would lose Dayak-majority ones. Yet six Dayak-majority seats fell to the opposition.

Table 3. Results of Sarawak Parliamentary Election 2018

| Govt- Sarawak BN | Won              | Total |
|------------------|------------------|-------|
| PBB              | 10               |       |
| PRS              | 3                |       |
| SUPP             | 1                |       |
| PDP              | 2                |       |
|                  | Sarawak BN Total | 19    |
| Opposition       |                  |       |
| PH-DAP           | 6                |       |
| PH-PKR           | 4                |       |
|                  | PH coalition     | 10    |
| Independents     | 2                | 2     |
|                  | Total            | 31    |

Source: Malaysian Election Commission website (n.d.).

Note: The two independents joined PKR after the election, effectively giving PKR six parliamentary seats in Sarawak.

The big surprise in Sarawak was the loss of all seven of the Chinese-majority constituencies (Bandar Kuching, Bandar Miri, Bandar Sibu, Stampin, Lanang, and Sarikei) to the PH. SUPP was confident that it could win at least one of the Chinese seats – either Bandar Miri or Stampin.<sup>11</sup> An even bigger surprise was the loss of six Dayak-majority seats (Selangau, Saratok, Julau, Lubok Antu, Puncak Borneo, Mas Gading) to PKR and independents.

DAP seized five (Bandar Kuching, Stampin, Bandar Sibu, Lanang, and Sarikei) of the six Chinese seats, while Bandar Miri fell to PKR's Dr. Michael Teo. Although SUPP ran a strong Sarawak rights campaign and was expected to give real competition for Stampin and Bandar Miri, the mood of the Sarawak Chinese was simply too anti-Najib and anti-UMNO for them to win. Like most of the Chinese community elsewhere, these individuals wanted above all to get rid of “kleptocratic” Najib and “racist” UMNO from power (Chin 2018a).

There were other local factors at work, too. First, many Chinese voters felt SUPP's campaign was disingenuous. Dr. Sim Kui Hian, SUPP

11 Interviews with several SUPP leaders in February 2018.

president, kept repeating that a strong SUPP and Sarawak BN was required for Sarawak to regain MA63's autonomy. SUPP's campaign slogan was "I'm in for a stronger Sarawak," but Chinese voters did not buy the argument for the simple reason that SUPP was already part of the ruling BN – both at the federal and state level. If SUPP and Sarawak BN were not able to deliver MA63's autonomy as part of the BN, additional seats would not matter. In addition, Chinese voter felt insulted that SUPP had tried to distance itself from Najib and the 1MDB corruption scandal. Dr. Sim claimed that Sarawak BN dares to say "No to UMNO" (*The Borneo Post* 2018a), being reinforced by Chief Minister Abang Johari's statement that SUPP is not a puppet of UMNO (*The Borneo Post* 2018b). The chief minister further insulted the urban Chinese by making the implausible claim that the 1MDB scandal had nothing to do with Sarawak BN, by stating: "That one [any issue concerning Najib and Rosmah] is their problem that side, not ours" (*The Borneo Post* 2018c). This was blatantly untrue, and the voters knew it (Chin 2018c).

Second, because Sarawak held its parliamentary and state elections separately, Chinese voters traditionally "split" their vote. In previous elections, the Chinese had voted for SUPP in state elections but for the opposition in parliamentary ones. They knew that most of the decisions taken affecting their own lives were probably decided at the state level, and hence it was important to be represented by SUPP. However, at the parliamentary level, they wanted the opposition to represent them in Kuala Lumpur to register their unhappiness with the anti-Chinese policies adopted by the UMNO-led federal government. This form of strategic voting became the norm from the 1990s onwards, and thus influenced the Chinese vote in 2018 too (Chin 1996).

It did not help that the Chinese were already angry with Najib and the BN. In the 1996 state elections, they gave some seats to SUPP because of the "Adenan factor"; in other words, Chinese voters were relieved that, after 33 years, Taib was finally stepping down as chief minister. Adenan's "Sarawak for Sarawakians" state nationalism came just at the right time to capture the political moment, and the Chinese fully took the bait.

In the 2018 general election, this was different however. Abang Johari – Adenan's successor – did not have the goodwill or the "honeymoon period" that Adenan had been graced with. As mentioned, some of the blatant lies told by SUPP and BN were too much for the Sarawak Chinese. They simply wanted Najib and UMNO out of power.

In the Dayak-majority areas, the main reason why six constituencies fell to the PH can be explained largely by local factors. In three of the seats (Selangau, Lubok Antu, and Julau), the main reason was internal sabotage;

in particular, revenge against Dr. James Masing, the president of BN–Parti Raykat Sarawak (PRS).

In Selangau and Lubok Antu, the BN–PRS incumbents were dropped at the last minute by Dr. Masing. In both cases, the incumbents immediately activated their electoral machinery (which was ready to go anyway, to support their candidature) and supported the strongest opposition candidate. In Selangau, the strongest opponent was Sarawak PKR’s leader, Baru Bain. In Lubok Antu, meanwhile, the strongest opponent was Jugah Muyang, standing as an independent – although in reality he was a PKR member.

In Julau, the BN–PRS candidate, Joseph Sallang, faced a revolt as well. PRS members unhappy with Dr. Masing were able to dislodge him because Sallang’s main challenger was Larry Sng Wei Shien, an independent. Larry was no ordinary independent; he was a state assemblyman for Pelagus, situated next door to Julau. Larry’s father, Sng Chee Hua, used to be the MP for Julau in the 1990s. The Sng family are wealthy, and thus could match any vote-buying undertaken by the official BN–PRS candidate. Sng Chee Hua had plenty of reasons to take revenge on Dr. Masing – he was the latter’s deputy in BN–PRS before falling out of favour. Larry also benefited from an unofficial agreement that he would face Sallang in a straight fight, where thus there would be no PH candidates or independents. It is certain that Sng was in touch with the PH leadership and other Dr. Masing critics to ensure that his son faced Sallang in a straight fight. The close links between Sng and PH were confirmed when Larry Sng immediately joined PKR after the election, and was voted into the PKR Central Leadership Council (*Free Malaysia Today* 2018a).

In the other three seats that Sarawak BN lost (Puncak Borneo, Mas Gading, and Saratok), the candidate factor and internal sabotage were important contributors. In Puncak Borneo, the successful opposition PKR candidate, Willie Mongin, was well known in the constituency. He had previously stood (and lost) in the 2011, 2013, and 2016 elections. Thus by 2018, it was his fourth attempt at office. The Sarawak BN candidate, Jeanoth Sinel, was also heavily damaged by reports a few days before polling that he had acquire native land that was supposed to be communal, implying that he had “stolen” his own people’s land (*The Borneo Post* 2018d).

In Mas Gading, it was also largely the same situation. The successful DAP candidate, Mordi Bimol, had stood before in the 2013 parliamentary election but lost due to multiple candidates running. In 2018, however, he faced a straight fight with the Sarawak BN–Progressive Democratic Party’s (PDP) incumbent, Anthony Nogeh Gumbek. Mordi also had the support of Patrick anak Uren, the former MP for the area. In both Puncak



Borneo and Mas Gading, the majority voters were from the Bidayuh community.

In the Saratok constituency, the story was slight different. The BN–PDP was weak there because the incumbent MP William Mawan anak Ikom had left the party and now claimed to be an independent. The PKR candidate, Ali Biju, was the incumbent state assemblyman for the area; he had lost the Saratok parliamentary seat narrowly in 2013 (Free Malaysia Today 2018b). Hence Ali Biju was already the front runner prior to the election. His BN–PDP opponent was an unknown quantity in comparison.

In both Mas Gading and Saratok, there was a quiet revolt within PDP. There were some PDP members who were unhappy with the party president, especially when he pushed for the party to go national. Previously, the party was called the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) – before the word Sarawak was eventually dropped, so that the party could expand beyond Sarawak. Many members did not agree with this step being taken (*Malay Mail* 2018).

Another important factor in the Dayak-majority areas was the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST). The GST had actually led to an increase in the cost of living, despite earlier promises by the BN that it would lead to cheaper prices. The rural Dayak-majority areas were especially sensitive to the price increases experienced.

## Post-Election: Collapse of the BN in Sabah and Sarawak

When it became clear that Sabah BN had lost its mandate in Sabah and the federal BN lost Putrajaya, the Sabah BN parties began to abandon the mothership. The first to leave the BN was UPKO, doing so on election night (9 May). UPKO announced that it was joining up with the PWS–Sabah PH alliance to form the next state government, giving it a clear majority. On 11 May, the Chinese-based LDP announced that it was leaving the BN. A day later, on 12 May, the KDM-based PBRS and PBS announced that it would leave the BN as well.

Sabah UMNO, the strongest party before the election, suddenly became the weakest one when its leader Musa Aman left abruptly for London. The day before, on 10 May, Musa Aman had forced the Sabah governor to appoint him as chief minister. Musa claimed to have a majority since the two GS–STAR assemblymen would support him. A day later, the governor filed a police report alleging that Musa had “intimidated” him and forced him into holding the swearing-in ceremony (*Malaysiakini*

2018a). Two days later, Shafie Apdal was sworn in as chief minister instead, and heralded in the new PWS–PH administration.<sup>12</sup>

In neighbouring Sarawak, events were less dramatic. Although Sarawak BN was still in power at the state level, the change at the federal one gave an unmistakable signal that the electorate was capable of throwing out the incumbent. Unlike in Sabah, the four parties within Sarawak BN remained intact – and, moreover, Sarawak BN was still the state government. As mentioned, Sarawak holds its state elections separately and Sarawak BN had won a landslide victory in the 2016 ones.

Taib Mahmud, the real power behind Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), flew to Kuala Lumpur to meet up with Mahathir the day after the results were announced. Taib tried to get Mahathir to accommodate Sarawak BN within the PH coalition, but Mahathir refused to commit himself to this (*The Star* 2018b). With no other political choice, Chief Minister Abang Johari announced that Sarawak BN would leave BN and re-brand itself as the earlier-mentioned GPS. This coalition would only accept into its ranks Sarawak-based parties, and would pursue a “Sarawak First” policy. The number one priority for GPS was to reclaim the rights set out in MA63 (*The Borneo Post* 2018e). The strategy here was to entice all Sarawak-based parties into a single GPS and face the PH at the next state election, due in 2021.

GPS’s duplicity on MA63 could not hide the fact that it was Sarawak BN, and then the same people again in GPS – meaning those who had allowed the federal government to take over all of Sarawak’s rights for the past half-century. In fact for 33 years Sarawak was under the strongman rule of Taib Mahmud, and he was a strong political ally of Mahathir. If the latter had centralised too much power in the federal government, then on the Sarawak side Taib Mahmud did not resist – and certainly never mentioned anything about MA63 (Hazis 2012).

## Conclusion

In Sabah, the fall of the Sabah UMNO-led BN was due to the rise of PWS. Shafie Apdal and Darrell Leiking understood instinctively that it would take a Sabah-based party to dislodge Sabah BN. Their strategy of not joining PH but merely entering into an alliance with it instead was the correct one given the strong sense of state nationalism prevailing there. They were helped by the unpopularity of Sabah UMNO and the BN KDM-based

12 Musa Aman went to court claiming that he was the rightful chief minister, but ultimately lost the case. See the *Straits Times* (2018).

parties, seen by the younger KDM population as out of touch, tired, and not defending the rights of non-Muslims. The Chinese were already leaning towards the opposition, too.

In Sarawak, other than in the urban Chinese constituencies, Sarawak BN suffered from hubris and overconfidence. They expected the old formula of vote-buying and patronage distributed among the Dayak population to work, as it had done countless times before in previous polls. I have detailed in this paper how the Dayak-majority seats won by PH were attained mainly due to specifically local factors: primarily, due to unhappiness with the selection of candidates and to internal sabotage.

The most important outcome of GE14 is that now both of the East Malaysian states are not politically in sync with the federal PH government. PWS is at best an ally, while GPS sees PH as its likely main competitor in the next state election, due to be held in 2021. The last time this happened was in the 1960s, during the first decade of the Malaysian federation's existence.

Going forward, the issues of state nationalism and MA63-related autonomy will now be permanent features of politics in both of these states. All the major parties in Sabah and Sarawak, including the PH ones in both states, claim to be state champions pushing back against the federal government. What this means for federal–state relations in Malaysia remains unclear, as the federal government never had to confront such a strong sense of state nationalism in Sabah and Sarawak simultaneously. As these two states pursue more autonomy in line with what the local population wants, this process may lead in future to a complete new configuration of federal–state relations in Malaysia. What is certain, however, is that the days of direct federation intervention in both states are over (Chin 1997b).

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